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ABSTRACT

A difficult issue for student affairs professionals at Christian colleges is homosexuality. It is important for Christian student affairs professionals to understand the unique issues homosexual students face, develop programming and resources for homosexual students, and determine appropriate institutional responses to infractions of college rules concerning homosexuality. There is disagreement within the Christian community about the sinfulness of homosexual orientation or practice. Public colleges and universities have recently developed a more tolerant and accepting view of homosexuals on campus in keeping with the U.S. Constitution, which emphasizes equality. At many Christian colleges, an atmosphere of fear and intolerance prevails. Many such colleges need to rethink their culture and policies regarding homosexuality. The challenge for them is to create a positive atmosphere without compromising the lifestyle expectations of the Christian church. (Contains 20 references.) (SLD)

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Brandon D. Hill

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Introduction

One of the most difficult issues facing Christian Student Affairs professionals is Homosexuality. Many homosexual students are attending Christian campuses and these students have varying beliefs about the sinfulness of homosexual orientation and homosexual acts. There are also many Christian Student Affairs professionals that experience similar dilemmas. Many of these students have emotional problems due to rejection and harassment, which range from depression and substance abuse, to AIDs and suicide.

It is important for Christian Student Affairs Professionals to seek to understand the unique issues that homosexual students face, develop programming and resources for homosexual students, along with determining appropriate institutional responses to infractions of our rules regarding homosexuality. It is possible that even institutional rules regarding homosexuality need to be studied and revised.

Homosexuality Defined

One of the complications of homosexuality is that it is misunderstood and feared by many people. It is important to realize that there is a difference between homosexual orientation and homosexual acts. Homosexual orientation means that a person is attracted to the same sex. However, some homosexual oriented persons do not participate in homosexual acts, which are defined as same sex sexual acts. These acts include mutual masturbation, oral, and anal sex.

There is disagreement within the Christian body as to the sinfulness of homosexuality. Some Christians would say that having a homosexual orientation is sinful; others would say that the orientation is not sinful, but that the acts are, and even

others would say that the acts are not sinful. Some even suggest that for a homosexual oriented person to engage in a heterosexual act is a sin, because it is against their God-given nature.

The debate also continues over the origin of homosexuality, and many Christians believe that it is a sinful state that one can retreat from. Others believe that it is genetic or inherited. Collins (1980) states that "The Bible says very little about homosexuality. Seven passages mention it and in each case, the reference is relatively brief. Clearly, it never is approved but neither is it singled out as being worse than other sins" (p. 318). Collins believes that 'overt homosexuality' is sinful, but that homosexual feelings are not, unless constantly thought about, which would be giving over to lust.

DuMontier (2000) suggests though that these seven passages have been used as "a means of justifying prejudice and discrimination" (p. 331). DuMontier continues by suggesting that the seven passages that Collins refers to have been misinterpreted and mistranslated for years to reinforce society's prejudice. DuMontier also points out that Jesus never addressed the issue of homosexuality. DuMontier is careful to point out that faith development is a very important part of a person's development, and too often homosexuals are rejected by the very institutions that they are seeking help from. DuMontier believes that Christian Institutions should help homosexuals to develop their faith journeys instead of focusing on the 'sin' of homosexuality.

McDonald and Steinhorn (1993) are lesbians who encourage churches to understand homosexuality and accept homosexuals into their memberships. They also believe that the Bible has been inappropriately used to discriminate and exclude homosexuals from the Christian Faith.

Ritter and O'Neill (1989) state of homosexuals that, "It will be through the reality of their orientation, rather than in spite of it, that they will reach a sense of the mystical and transcendent. In other words, their losses become a springboard for spiritual transformation" (p. 68). They believe that because homosexuals have experienced more pain and rejection that their spiritual journeys will have more importance to them.

While debate continues over the Biblical, spiritual, and moral value of homosexuality, researchers have been studying the development of a homosexual orientation and its effects for years.

Current Research

While many Christians still believe that homosexuality is a sin, current research, public thought, and policy should begin to influence Christians to carefully re-think their beliefs on this issue.

The Kinsey Sexual Development Website (2000) quotes Kinsey et al. (1948) as stating "Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual…an individual may be assigned to a position on a scale of each period in his life" (p. 639). Kinsey suggests many people fall somewhere between exclusively heterosexual and homosexual. Kinsey's research also found that 37% of all males between puberty and age 55 have had some same-sex encounter resulting in orgasm.

Gonsiorek et al (1995) suggest that sexual orientation develops over a person's life, and that it is hard to determine what a person's sexual orientation is at any point in time. They further reason that if sexual orientation is not stable over the life span then it is possible to have therapy to change the orientation.

Coleman and Remafedi (1989) suggested that a person is born without a sexual orientation, and "that sexual orientation is actually established during childhood" (p. 37).

Collins suggests that sexual orientation can be influenced by several factors during early childhood including parent-child relationships, other family relationships, fear, and willful choice of homosexual or heterosexual actions. Collins suggests that inadequate or non-existent father or mother role models can influence homosexual orientation.

Goff (1990) reminds us that until 1974 homosexuality was thought to be a mental disorder. The 1974 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R) declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder, but referred to ego-dystonic homosexuality as a diagnosable disorder. Ego-dystonic problems occur when a person is aware of their homosexual orientation but struggles with accepting it. In 1984, the American Psychiatric Society (APA) also removed ego-dystonic homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. Teague (1992) concludes, "homosexuality is a nonpathologic variant in the continuum of sexual orientation" (p. 423).

Support groups such as NARTH (National Association for the Research and Therapy of Homosexuality), The ExGays, and RENEW report that they are having great success with helping homosexuals change their sexual orientation to heterosexual.

Tozer and McClanahan (1999) question the validity and ethics of such treatments. They suggest that since the APA does not consider homosexuality a mental disorder that it is unethical to help someone convert to a sexual orientation that is not natural for them. Rather, Tozer and McClanahan believe that counselors should help homosexuals overcome the prejudice that is aimed towards them, rather than help them change orientation. They call this affirmative counseling and suggest that an affirmative therapist

'celebrates and advocates the validity of homosexual relationships." Tozer and McClanahan also doubt the outcomes of studies showing that conversion therapy works.

Throckmorton (1998) has studied efforts to modify patterns of sexual arousal, and has determined that such strategies have great success, and can be conducted in an ethical manner, but that these same methods have not succeeded in changing orientation.

Yarhouse and Jones (1997) believe that a counselor must assist the client in reaching the client's goals. They believe that if a client wants to change their sexual orientation that the counselor must first determine the reasons for the client wanting to do so, talk to the client about all of the current research, and then determine a strategy for helping the client reach those goals. They believe that it is unethical for a counselor to tell a client that it is impossible to changes one's sexual orientation.

The APA is currently involved in discussion over whether or not it should allow its members to practice conversion therapy.

Homosexuality on College Campuses Today

Public Colleges and Universities have recently developed a more tolerant and accepting view of homosexuals on their campuses. This should be so as public institutions are not governed by a moral or biblical code, but rather by the Constitution, which emphasizes Equality. Public Institutions have been moderately successful at beginning and supporting gay and lesbian groups.

Christian Colleges however, still have an atmosphere of intolerance and fear, most likely due to a Biblical moral culture that few understand but follow. While the Biblical stance on Homosexuality is still in debate, most Christians would find it un-Christlike to reject any person, as the Bible teaches love of all persons, and not rejection. However,

Christians still tend to reject homosexuals. Many Christian Colleges have rules against homosexual activity and therefore are hesitant to create programs that cater to homosexuals for fear of supporting the homosexual 'lifestyle'. Christian Colleges must promote a cultural change on their campuses regarding homosexuality in order to better serve homosexual students.

Many homosexual students have 'come out' on public campuses, and a few on Christian Campuses. Homosexual students are also talking and asking questions about their homosexuality more than before, but Switzer (1999) suggests that it is often difficult for teenagers to address homosexual issues right away. Switzer suggests that counselors sometimes have to ask the right questions to determine the real reason that a student has sought out counseling. Many homosexual students have great fear in 'coming out' because of harassment or rejection that they may feel. Christian Colleges and Student Affairs professionals must be prepared to talk to homosexual students about their future in ministry, church roles, and heaven and hell.

Goff (1990) suggests that some of the behaviors that college homosexual students may exhibit are confusion, anxiety, depression, acting out, fear of being found out, isolation, substance abuse, performance anxiety, denial, and shame. These behaviors result in social, behavioral, and academic problems.

McFarland (1993) reports that "gay and lesbian youth are two to six times more likely than other teens to attempt suicide, and they account for 30% of all completed suicides among teens even though they constitute only 10% of the teenage population" (p. 19). McFarland suggests that homosexuality does not lead the suicide attempt, but rather feelings of rejection and abnormalcy, brought about cultural pressures.

Mooney (1992) mentions that homophobia on campuses is increasing as greater numbers of homosexual students become obvious on campuses. This in turn results in greater harassment of homosexuals, which results more emotional problems relating to rejection. Homosexual students then tend to band together for support. Public campuses have done a better job of assisting with this than Christian Campuses. Christian campuses must also increase education and awareness of STDS, AIDS, and other sexually related problems.

Important Future Considerations

Many Christian Campuses need to rethink their culture and policies regarding homosexuality. Many of these campuses are ignoring the issue of homosexuality by standing behind their lifestyle commitments, which is damaging Christian homosexual students who need support and affirmation. Many Christian Campus student handbooks forbid homosexuality, which is a state of being. At least these campuses should reword their handbooks to forbid homosexual acts. Christian campuses must also review their discipline process regarding homosexuality, and the use of required conversion therapy counseling to 'straighten' students.

It is possible in the future that state governments may legalize homosexual marriages. Christian Colleges may be forced to honor these marriages with admission, financial aid, and for those that provide married housing, must cater to these new marriages or risk losing Federal and State aid.

Christian Colleges must also consider providing support groups for homosexual students without concern for objections by college constituencies. Gonsiorek (1988) states, " Most gay and lesbian teenagers derive the greatest benefit from participating in

support groups" (p. 121). Teague also reports "members in college-based groups have also experienced a more positive self-concept as a result of being in such a group" (p.435). If Christian Campuses do not support these groups, they may encourage emotional problems amongst their homosexual student population, or even lose them to public schools that are more tolerant of their orientation, but less tolerant of religious teaching.

Christian campuses must also determine if they want to support the efforts of groups such as NARTH and Exodus, by allowing and supporting chapters on their campuses.

Conclusion

McFarland concludes his article with a call to "create a school environment promoting not only tolerance of gay and lesbian youth, but also an affirmation of their value." Christian Colleges need to determine how they can create this positive atmosphere without compromising the lifestyle expectations of the Christian Church. The question of "How would Jesus Respond?" also needs to be asked and answered. My belief is that Jesus would open loving and accepting arms to homosexual students, and that Christian Institutions need to do the same.

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